

# Personal Column

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Crop Production Agent

## **Fall armyworm moths making an appearance in Kansas**

Fall armyworm can damage several important Kansas crops as well as pasture, turf, and home landscaping. According to Anthony Zukoff, K-State Research and Extension Entomologist, this insect does NOT overwinter in Kansas. Rather, it is native to the tropical regions of the western hemisphere and is active year-round along the gulf coast and southern Florida, migrating in from these locations each year. Two full generations are possible in Kansas with defoliation and grain damage being the biggest concerns.

Feeding damage from fall armyworm during the vegetative stage in corn and sorghum causes chewed-up and ragged-looking leaves. In fact, one of the common names used for fall armyworm during this stage is “ragworm”. Sorghum is particularly at-risk during grain fill, as fall armyworm will completely consume berries as they develop.

The number of moths entering Kansas will likely increase through July and at-risk crops should be scouted regularly for the remainder of the growing season. Zukoff further points out that the adult moths are all laying eggs in plants at this time when they arrive. There is almost a continuous flow of adult moths arriving and coming up from the south, so also continual laying of eggs is also happening. Once the eggs are laid, they hatch in about 5-7 days depending on factors such as air temperature. Caterpillars increase in size at an exponential rate and a majority of feeding occurs during the later stage of development. It is critical to scout thoroughly and treat if needed before the caterpillars are over ½ inch long. Larger caterpillars are harder to control and do the most damage.

This is considered the first generation of the fall armyworm and usually doesn’t pose as much threat to the crops. The first generation is usually small, and crops are in vegetative stages. Caterpillar feeding will make plants look bad, but yield is not at risk with the first generation.

Zukoff reminds producers that the second generation will come later in the season and poses the greatest risk, especially for heading sorghum. Additionally, use caution when making control decisions in alfalfa as flaring aphids are possible.

Recommended thresholds can be found below.

### **Fall Armyworm Thresholds**

**Alfalfa:** 1-2 caterpillars per square foot can destroy seedling alfalfa. 10-15 per square foot can destroy 12” tall plants.

**Corn:** Damage to the whorl stage in early summer is typically not a concern and will not impact yield. Bt corn may prevent ear damage.

**Sorghum:** Damage to the whorl stage in early summer is typically not a concern. 1-2 larvae/head during flowering to soft dough reduces yield by 5-10%.

**Wheat:** Larval “window-paning” in early planted wheat can be a concern. Very late second-generation fall armyworm will be the biggest concern for wheat. If 25-30% of plants show damage, examine the field frequently. Treat at 2-3 active larvae/ft.

**Pasture/Brome:** If damage is notable or there is window-paning, treatment may be warranted with 4 to 5 caterpillars per square foot.

Zukoff stresses that since fall armyworms are present for several months of the growing season, it is possible that sometimes mixed infestations of different caterpillar species can occur. As with any pest, proper identification is important to ensure that the right control recommendations are followed.

K-State Research and Extension has several **Insect Management Guides** for each crop that explains the management of the fall armyworm and can be found ONLINE or at any of our District Offices. If you have further questions on insect management with the Fall armyworm, contact me at any of our Post Rock Extension District Offices in Beloit, Lincoln, Mankato, Osborne or Smith Center.

*Post Rock Extension District of K-State Research and Extension serves Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Osborne, and Smith counties. Sandra may be contacted at [swick@ksu.edu](mailto:swick@ksu.edu) or by calling Smith Center, 282-6823, Beloit 738-3597, Lincoln 524-4432, Mankato 378-3174, or Osborne 346-2521. Join us for our weekly “The Ag Roundup” by simply emailing me and getting on our weekly ag listserv. Also remember our website is [www.postrock.ksu.edu](http://www.postrock.ksu.edu) and my twitter account is @PRDcrops.*